Colliding Feminisms: Britney Spears, “Tweens,” and the Politics of Reception

Melanie Lowe

Video-games, cartoon violence, and “shoot-em-up” action movies provoke school shootings. Ever-shrinking supermodels and actors encourage eating disorders. Heavy metal music lures boys to Satanism and suicide. Hollywood teaches girls passivity and submission. Or so we learn on the nightly news.

Scores of studies that seem to support an influence of media content on audience beliefs and behavior drive our ever-current “blame-the-media” political climate. These high-profile studies, many of them policy oriented, typically conclude that the social wellbeing of a particular group is endangered by the frequent depiction of violence, sex, sexism, racism, consumerism, and even light “PG” violence or sexual innuendo. Concerning body image and the health of women and girls, effects researchers tend to concentrate most intensely on the role that advertising, fashion magazines, and celebrities—actors and supermodels in particular—play in shaping female body perception. Feminist writing, particularly in the 1970s and early 1980s, often argues that images of women in subordinate, passive, or even non-technologically savvy roles encourage societal adherence to patriarchal notions of femininity. The popular press itself, typically the perpetrator in media crimes, now frequently toes the line. The cover of the February 14, 2000 People Weekly, for example, reads: “Pop princess Britney Spears: Too sexy too soon? Little girls love her, but her image makes some moms nervous.” The message is loud and clear: Mom, be nervous; be very, very nervous.

Much recent academic literature in communications studies, however, challenges the direct influence of media content suggested by mainstream effects research. Connections between what an audience takes in and how it thinks and behaves are complex, ambiguous, and highly dependent on individual identity, family and peer groups, and social relationships. Postfeminist criticism likewise questions a cause-and-effect approach, particularly the images-of-women theorizing that dominated second-wave feminism. No longer do we assume an unproblematic relationship between image and audience, one in which the text clearly transmits meaning and the viewer easily decodes it. Taking cues from literary criticism, academic writers about film, comic books, literature, soap operas, professional wrestling—in short, nearly any and all artifacts of popular culture—increasingly understand meaning not as something intrinsic to a text but rather realized and performed by an audience. Meaning is constantly negotiated and highly dependent on context of consumption and identity of consumer.

In this qualitative study of early adolescent girls and their complex relationship to singer Britney Spears, I engage this audience not as passive recipients of questionable material but as active agents in the creation of their own culture. The
Attacking Britney

During the summer of 1999 I conducted focus-group sessions with groups of five to six early-adolescent middle-class girls. The general topic for discussion in all of the focus group sessions was “their” music, the current teen pop. And, in 1999, teen pop could be summed up in four names: 'N Sync, Backstreet Boys, 98°, and Britney Spears. The most striking early event in every conversation was a very strong reaction to teenage pop sensation Britney Spears, *Rolling Stone*’s crowned “Teen Queen” (Daly 60). As soon as one girl mentioned her name, the others would jump into the conversation, and, with excited, raised voices, rip Ms. Spears to shreds:

[Emily, who had left the room briefly, enters.]
Anne: We’re talking about Britney Spears.
Emily: She’s slutty!

... 
Rachel [to Melanie]: Did you see the pictures in *Rolling Stone*? She looks really trashy.
Anne: Slore!
Brenda: Slore!
Anne and Brenda: Slore slore slore slore slore slore slore whore!
Melanie: Is that a new word?
Anne: Slut and whore together! [laughing]

“Slut,” “Whore,” and “Slore” (an elision of slut and whore) were the first words out of their mouths. There was no such reaction to Christina Aguilera, another teenage pop star, or to Brandy, Monica, or Maya. The hunks in 98° and heartthrob Justin Timberlake of 'N Sync were neither here nor there. For these girls, Britney Spears is a tough and touchy subject.

At first we might argue that by calling Spears a “whore” the girls are enabling their own subordination. As Cowie and Lees first recognized, labels like “whore,” “slut,” and “slag” are not only applied to women and girls unfairly, but, with the opposite constructs “virgin,” “pris,” and “drag,” form a discursive dichotomy that is used to describe nearly all female behavior, sexual and otherwise. While the girls Cowie and Lees interviewed recognized such labels as degrading and unjust, they nevertheless used the words themselves in much the same way as the boys did, thereby perpetuating the discursive process that controlled them. It is certainly possible to read the abject language hurled at Britney Spears by her female fans in this light and be disheartened by how little has changed in the twenty years since Cowie and Lees’s study of working-class girls in London. But, in conversation about Britney Spears, what struck me most was not the girls’ casual use of cruel and demeaning language, but the intensity of their emotion: they were angry. Although they may feel some discomfort with the no-win situation set up by the good girl/bad girl, slag/drag, or virgin/whore dichotomy that has plagued women for ages, what distresses them most is finding this good girl/bad girl combination within Spears herself.
They desperately want to believe Spears’s good-girl image and projected naïveté, but (most of the time) they seem to know better. Because of the clashing photographic images, contradictory messages in her music, and inconsistencies in the course of her career, the girls don’t know which is the real Spears—the pure and wholesome Britney they meet in *Teen People* or the Lolita they discover in *Rolling Stone*, the chaste Britney of “Sometimes” or the lusty Britney of “… Baby One More Time.” Unlike Madonna, we don’t read Spears as using such ambiguity and self-conscious play with traditional constructs of femininity to challenge or undo dominant gender codes. And, unlike Madonna’s fans of the 1980s, Spears’s fans of today seem not to feel empowered by any overt expressions of her sexuality. In the end, the girls deem Britney Spears a “whore” not because they find her attire inappropriate or her behavior raw, but largely because she affects “innocent” at the same time. As we shall see, the frustration and anger they feel on account of these conflicting Britneys reflect a deeper dilemma for today’s early adolescent girls—the main consumers of teen pop: their feminist consciousness colliding with a postfeminist culture.

**Methodology**

Most focus groups met in private rooms at YMCA Teen Center summer programs or summer camps. I conducted this fieldwork during the summer at camps rather than during the academic year at schools because I was hoping for as relaxed and casual an atmosphere as possible. I chose to work with focus groups rather than conduct one-on-one interviews for several reasons. First and foremost, I wanted to experience something of teen-pop culture in action—early adolescent girls talking to each other rather than to me directly about the music and pop stars that interest them. As Barbara Bradby demonstrates in her study of preteen girls and Madonna, “the place to investigate the work women do in relation to texts of femininity,” particularly resistance to patriarchy and dominant discourses of femininity, “is in the local, social organization of talk” (Bradby 70). I was also hoping that the girls would get into the role playing and dancing they reportedly did at home, and indeed they did, putting on quite a show at times! (It is hard to imagine such activity happening in an interview situation.) A final reason for choosing focus groups over interviews was practical: these girls were at summer camp and did not want to be taken out of an activity to speak with some stranger. They were, however, quite excited to be able to just hang out together, leave the boys behind (for the moment), listen to music, and talk about anything they wanted. All in all, I found them engaging, imaginative, informative, and refreshingly uninhibited.

Setting up these sessions required the usual formalities and meetings with center directors, but once I was on site with the girls I tried to be as casual as possible. As a young, middle-class white woman, who is reasonably well plugged into their culture (I worked for several years as the pre-and early-teen unit leader at a suburban day camp), I consciously strove not to be seen as “teacher” but someone more like an older sister or friend. Although I am around fifteen years older than the girls in the focus groups, I tried to dampen the sense of generational difference by dressing as they did (mostly cut-off shorts and T-shirts), wearing little or no makeup (even though, of course, most of the girls wear eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick or gloss), and remaining on the same physical level as they were on at all times. Usually we all sat on the floor together or lounged on gym mats. I avoided
standing before the group and addressing them like a teacher or counselor might. By the end of the sessions, particularly in the two groups profiled below, I felt we had achieved a certain intimacy. The rapport we developed seemed, to me, something like friendship for the moment. I believe we had each other’s confidence. But still, my own position and power in relation to the girls inevitably influenced every aspect of the sessions despite my attempts to minimize this power differential. In my reading of the relationships between these girls and teen-pop culture, I remain conscious of and attempt to relay how my presence, power, and positioning affected the discourse.

Because my previous experiences with preteen girls and camcorders resulted in some of the girls playing to the camera and others feeling overly self-conscious about their appearance, I audiotaped rather than videotaped the focus-group sessions. At first, many of the girls were fixated on the fact that they were being audiotaped. After I showed them my tape recorder and turned it on for the session, one girl would grab the recorder and speak (well, more like shout) into it and then pass it to her friends. At the beginning of a few of the sessions (in fact, in both of the sessions that make up the primary fieldwork for this ethnography), some of the girls played like they were interviewing each other, and then, once they got into this role-playing game, they would pass the recorder around and introduce themselves. This particular game proved quite valuable to me. I did not have to put them on the spot up front and ask them too many questions about themselves. They provided their own introductions. This also gave me a clear example of each girl speaking (mostly) alone. Many times during the transcription process, particularly when it was difficult to tell who was speaking, I referred back to these introductions to be sure I was hearing whom I thought I was hearing.

The transcriptions that follow are written out as a drama script. No single word or phrase was omitted, and I have represented the significant pauses in their speech—pauses that occurred when they seemed to be searching for words, didn’t want to finish a phrase, were looking to a friend for support, etc.—with an em-dash (—). Most dialogue excerpts are unbroken, but, to avoid overly long excerpts and the risk of overwhelming the reader with detail unrelated to the main argument presented here, a few of the excerpts have been abbreviated. Omitted were only those bits of the conversation in which the girls got off the topic being considered, were distracted by something outside the group or room, or started up a private conversation on a different subject with another girl in the focus group. If a digression was significant itself or seemed an attempt to avoid or sidestep an issue, I left it in. An ellipsis (…) represents any omitted material. Quite often, more than one girl spoke at a time. The most significant cleaning up I did during the transcription process was to write out each girl’s “lines” intact rather than to try to preserve the layered effect of the dialogue. In other words, I am privileging content over time in my representation of the conversations.

The sessions all started similarly. I introduced myself briefly, told them a little about what I was up to, and asked them if they were interested in talking about music. Then, after the tape recorder routine, I got the girls talking about music with a few questions about what radio stations they listen to, who their favorite artists are, what they like about these artists or their music, etc. Once the talking started, I hoped the girls would take the conversation wherever they wanted to, and generally they did. I tried not to lead so much as listen. However, at certain points, when the girls touched on an issue I found particularly significant, I asked them direct
questions or brought out some materials for them to consider—CDs, videos, pictures, magazines, and the like. At these moments, the girls spoke to me somewhat more formally and more seriously. During the review, transcription, and analysis of the audiotapes, I listened carefully for how my direct address may have altered the group dynamic, affected their interactions with each other, or colored their responses. In general, I didn’t hear their speech become more stilted, awkward, inhibited, or embarrassed at these moments. They didn’t hesitate or clam up either. I’m quite confident that, for the most part, they weren’t simply telling me what they thought I wanted to hear or what they thought would be considered legitimate. But still, my presence, particularly during instances of direct questioning, may have encouraged the girls to give particularly mature, thoughtful, and sophisticated answers (see Buckingham). My participation in the focus group sessions necessarily forms part of any analysis.

Profiles of two focus groups

All dialogue excerpts are taken from transcripts of the audiotapes of meetings with two focus groups. I met both groups of girls at YMCA Teen Centers in the Nashville, Tennessee area. Although the majority of the girls have lived in Nashville for most of their lives, I found their conversation, convictions, and aspirations not at all unlike those of girls I met who grew up in other parts of the United States. I chose to center this discussion on the issues raised by these two focus groups largely because I was able to spend more time with them than any other group. When it comes to teen-pop culture in the United States, boundaries are not drawn geographically so much as by gender and age. As evidenced by the contribution African-American girls brought to our conversations, both black and white girls are consumers of teen pop and participate in its culture. Because there were no Latina, Asian-American, or Native American girls in any of the focus-group sessions, and because I chose not to seek them out actively, I cannot speak for their engagement with teen pop. But, since I found those taking part in teen-pop culture to be mostly middle- to upper-class girls, I would also speculate that demographics would break down more by socioeconomic class than race.

Figure 1 shows the profiles of the two focus groups. Although the girls assured me they wouldn’t mind if I used their real names, I have nonetheless changed their names to conceal their identities.

From admiration to envy

The music, videos, photographs, career, images, etc. of Britney Spears, as well as videos and articles about her in music and teen magazines, eventually became the main topic of discussion in the sessions with these two focus groups. At the time, Spears was at the top of the pop charts and practically owned the coveted Number One spot on MTV’s Total Request Live; so, it isn’t all that surprising that she is the female popstar today’s “tweens” (an advertising-industry term for those people between childhood and adolescence) have followed most closely. The girls have memorized every word of every song, and they can do every dance step in her videos. They know the most obscure “facts” about her life and rise to teen stardom. Jessica always carried a Discman and several CDs in her bag, and, despite the fact that she was among the most vocal in the full-on takedown of Spears, . . . Baby One More Time, Spears’s debut album, was always with her wherever she went.
Because of her carefully constructed thirteen-year-old girl-next-door image, most girls see Britney Spears as a peer, an equal, but one who’s become an international popstar. And, despite the fact that twenty minutes earlier they had nothing complimentary to say about the singer, they imagine—even fantasize—about spending time with her.

Anne: Britney Spears is, like, down to earth.
Jessica & Rachel: Yeah—
Anne: And she’s not trying so hard to be popular.
Wendy: She was at the Cool Springs Mall.
Melanie: Did you guys go see her when she was there?
Anne, Jessica, Wendy, & Rachel: No—
Anne: But it would be cool if she moved here—we could hang out!

(Focus group 1)

Catherine: If you see them by themselves, like, I saw this thing on Britney Spears, I saw, like, you know, how they have a making-the-video thing, I saw one on Britney Spears and at the end of the video she’s not as fake as she seems. She’s playing with her friends—she’s playing with her friends, or playing cards or something and she’s laughing with them. She’s not wearing any makeup; she looks like she just got out of bed and didn’t even do her hair. She was wearing pants and some Adidas shirt and it’s not like—she’s not always part of the media.

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**Focus group 1**

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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<td>Rachel</td>
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<td>10th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
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<td>8th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
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<td>8th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>13 yrs</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
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<td>8th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>13 yrs</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rachel, Jessica, Wendy, and Anne go to public schools. Emily and Brenda go to private schools. Rachel, Jessica, Brenda, Anne, and Emily are white. Wendy is African-American. Jessica and Brenda have boyfriends. Rachel and Brenda have cell phones and pagers. All girls have lived in Nashville suburbs for most of their lives.

**Focus group 2**

<table>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
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<td>7th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>13 yrs</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>13 yrs</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara</td>
<td>12 yrs</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Allison, Catherine, Julie, and Monique go to public schools. Kara goes to a private school. Allison, Julie, and Kara are white. Catherine and Monique are African-American. Allison, Monique, and Kara have lived in Nashville suburbs for most of their lives. Julie is a self-described “army brat” and has lived all over the United States, as well as in Latin America. Catherine is from Pasadena, California.

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Figure 1. Profiles of the focus groups.
Kara: And she loves her family but she can’t really be with her family because she’s on tour.
Catherine: She’s like us but she can’t be because she’s famous.

(Focus group 2)

The girls also see Britney Spears as someone who’s always wanted to be a star and worked hard to accomplish that goal:

Emily: She took lessons, you know, she practices. She was on the Mickey Mouse Club and took singing lessons since she was like three.
Rachel: And dancing lessons.
Emily: So, I mean, she knew she wanted to be a singer. And she went to a singing school in New York I think so she practiced hard.

(Focus group 1)

They have tremendous respect for her accomplishments. Despite their earlier vicious attack, they seem to both like and admire the singer.

The girls are also envious of Spears’s appearance, celebrity, and success, and they practically admit this themselves. Jessica, who seems confident and reasonably happy with her appearance, likes how Spears looks and confesses that she wouldn’t mind looking like Britney Spears. But behind her approval lies some resentment and, like the other girls, she quickly finds something to criticize.

Jessica: I mean, I would want to look like her—I mean, I know I could never look like that—her hair and—I mean, she’s pretty without makeup and all but she like overdid it. I used to wear really really dark eyeliner.
Melanie: You don’t anymore?
Jessica: No, it looks really trashy—I mean, I think I look better now.
Rachel: Yeah, you do.

(Focus group 1)

Catherine, who aspires to be a singer herself, reveals some envy of Spears, but quickly criticized the singer’s choice of clothing:

Catherine [to Melanie]: Know what? Ever since I was five, I think, I wanted to be a singer and like all these people that are—like—are like Britney Spears and all the guys who try to show off their bodies—that kinda steered me away from wanting to be a singer or whatever. I mean I would love to be like Britney Spears but if I was a singer I wouldn’t do that. It shouldn’t matter how much publicity they can get from that, I wouldn’t dress like a whore.

(Focus group 2)

Rachel, too, who is slightly overweight, voices first envy and then, in what is likely a reference to Spears’s alleged breast-augmentation surgery, disapproval and even disgust:

Rachel: I mean, I would want to look like her, but not like that! She looks like she wants to be another Pamela Anderson—you see pictures of Pamela Anderson and she’s so—she’s all falling out and like that.

(Focus group 1)

But simple admiration turned to jealousy doesn’t seem to account for the sustained intensity and anger of the girls’ initial attacks. Something larger and more disturbing than the latest antics of a favorite pop stars seems to be fueling their fire. As we shall see, in some ways, these girls feel betrayed by Britney Spears. And while on the surface this might seem a simple and obvious response—not unlike
the betrayal felt when one girl abandons her group of friends for a more “popular” group, one higher in their school’s social order—the forces that set up these girls’ feelings of betrayal are considerably distant from the source. It’s not the personal betrayal of a friend these girls are experiencing, but an ideological one, rooted in conflicts within their own culture. If we listen carefully to how early adolescent girls view the world around them, particularly the world as presented in mass media, and respect their observations, opinions, and politics, they themselves lead us to at least one significant source of their anxiety and confusion.

**Girl-power feminism**

At one point during a meeting with focus group 2, The Offspring’s song “Why Don’t You Get a Job?” came on the radio and, when the girls finally stopped singing along, they explained why they thought the song had a good message. Kara put it succinctly:

Kara: It’s saying “do it yourself, don’t just rely on some guy.”

(Focus group 2)

Although the girls in the focus groups want nothing to do with the Spice Girls (anymore, that is), they believe that the Spice Girls had a “good message” and that “girl power” is alive and well. For them, “girl power” is code for a certain type of feminism—girl solidarity, self-sufficiency, and equality. They believe that they should defend each other and stick together, they want careers so they don’t have to “rely on some guy,” and they expect girls and boys, women and men, to be treated equally in all situations. Perhaps surprisingly, the girls seem to have acquired much of their feminist conviction from mass media.

In terms of media representations and constructions of possibility, it’s a pretty good time to be a middle-class, twelve-year-old girl in suburbia, United States. With thoughts of high school right around the corner and college a near certainty for many, adolescent girls can look to an unprecedented number of women and find strength, brains, and confidence—from Madeline Albright on the world stage to the U.S. Women’s Soccer Team with their World Cup victory, and from television’s “Lisa Simpson” and “Daria” to “Agent Scully” and medical student “Lucy Knight.” When asked about the course they saw their lives taking after high school, most of them answered by mentioning career aspirations. And several of the careers they envision themselves pursuing bear a striking resemblance to those of female characters on their favorite television shows—from doctor (ER) to lawyer (Ally McBeal) to forensic scientist (The X-Files). They see these careers as true possibilities. After all, they have, in their words, “good role models”—from Mom, who is a lawyer, to MTV’s Daria, who will surely become one.

Although the girls don’t call it such, they also notice gender inequity all around them. And it gets them fired up, as revealed in their lengthy accounts of how girls and boys are treated differently in their schools. Nearly every conversation eventually turned to school at some point, and before long I was witnessing lively and animated girl-gripe sessions that covered everything from the sexism they experience in physical education classes to the skimpy outfits they believe some cheerleaders are forced to wear.

Emily: The guy teachers, like in PE, they treat you so much differently.
Rachel: They have, like, guy stuff and girl stuff.
Melanie: So you want to do the guy stuff too?
Brenda: I don’t necessarily want to do the guy stuff, but I think they should treat us equally and not different.
Emily & Rachel: Yeah—
Emily: The guys think they’re stronger and that’s because the PE teachers let them do all the stronger stuff—so they get stronger and we just, like—’cause we never get to do any of the hard stuff, so we just, like—
Rachel: I mean, I don’t want to do the hard stuff, but I just think—
Emily: They just give us the easy stuff.

Rachel: We’d rather do all the same thing.
Emily: So that’s the reason we’re not as strong as the guys are—we grew up thinking that we weren’t as strong—so when we get to, like, middle school we’re doing, like, the weaker stuff—so obviously we’re not going to be stronger and the guys come at us with stuff like that.
Rachel: Yeah

(Focus group 1)

Kara: The cheerleaders in my school, they get the skirts too big so that they will go down lower.
Catherine & Julie: Yeah
Catherine: My grandmother, she sews a lot and she has to sew them so that they come down further. They’re too short and they don’t like them—and then also when I was a cheerleader—they said that they bought the same size, every one was the same size, for everyone, and they were all small or whatever, so for some people they were 8 inches too high or whatever and they did that on purpose—they bought a size too small for everyone because these skinny girls and—
Melanie: So, who was “they”?
Catherine: The coach, Coach Morantz, he is, oh God, such a jerk—like, on the softball team we said “why can’t we go in the batting cage?” and he said “you are girls, go get me some lemonade and cookies and come back and we’ll talk”—and he was such a jerk—he’s so sexist, it’s not even funny and he’s the one who orders all this stuff so we had to have someone come to our school and take out the skirts because they were so tight.

(Focus group 2)

In these conversations the girls’ complaints of gender inequity ring loud and clear. The girls also voice concern about the objectification of women. For example, they don’t approve of the risqué outfits Britney Spears wears with increasing frequency, and they worry about the influence her attire might be having on younger girls, particularly their younger sisters. They condemned her performance at the Kids’ Choice Awards, for instance, broadcast May 1, 1999 on Nickelodeon, as particularly inappropriate for kids. (Spears performed without a bra—or so it might appear—in a skin-tight and translucent, very highly cropped t-shirt, revealing not only the new shape and size resulting from her recent “growth spurt” but much detail as well.)

Kara: She did this like little kids tour thingy
Julie: The Kids’ Choice Awards.
Kara: And she wore this really skin tight shirt and—
Julie: She doesn’t wear a bra!
Kara: You could see everything.

(Focus group 2)
But what disturbed the girls even more than Spears’s revealing outfit was the reason they suspect she wore it.

Melanie: If you could see everything, why did she wear it?
Kara: To show off her boob job! OK, guys see boobs, jugs, or whatever you want to call it in a little booty they see is tight, they just go—like their jaw falls and their eyes go “wooooh.”
Allison [laughing, jumping up and down]: Boing boing boing!

(Basic group 2)

Brenda: Because she had that—surgery—breast enhancement. She should let them grow—you know—naturally.
Rachel: She’s 17, so you know—she should just wait and see.
Anne: Most of her fans are guys, that’s probably why she did it, to make her look sexier—and for the guys—to make them look at her more.
Brenda: All the guys, they like—[giggling and hesitation]
Rachel [laughing]: The bigger the better!

(Basic group 1)

The girls explained that by “bouncing” around, showing off her “fake boobs” and body, Britney Spears is sending a terrible message to the young girls in the audience. In this short dialogue excerpt, Catherine cuts right to the heart of the matter:

Julie: Her chest was sticking out, what a huge surprise—it’s like—
Catherine: It’s only your boobs and butt that matter.

(Basic group 2)

And finally, Rachel, Wendy, and Jessica articulate clearly the impact they think other women’s choices can have on their lives. Here, they’re discussing the clothing choices of Brenda’s older sister, of whose behavior the girls obviously disapprove. (Brenda’s sister is eighteen years old and has three children by two fathers.)

Brenda: She dresses like my sister.
Melanie: How old is your sister?
Brenda: She’s 18—she has three kids
Rachel: Oh my God!
Brenda: And I think that’s—that’s crazy—she’s getting married and I’m really happy about that, but—she should stop dressing like that.
Jessica [laughing]: What do you think she’ll wear for her wedding?
Brenda: It makes her look loose.
Jessica: It makes her look like a slut!
Rachel: And it makes us—like—all women are sluts.
Wendy: The people who don’t dress like that, it makes us look bad.
Jessica: Like a slut!

(Focus group 1)

These girls are quite articulate when it comes to condemning patriarchal values. They complain about sexism, recognize the objectification of women’s bodies, and worry about the impact media images and messages might be having on younger girls. They also fret about how other girls’ attire and behavior might affect how they are perceived and treated. Although, as mentioned above, I took certain measures to dampen the sense of power differential during the focus-group
sessions, my presence and role as an adult researcher may have invited such “adult” comments (see Buckingham). Still, as I hear them, the girls—Catherine, Kara, and Rachel in particular—sound like young feminists.

Celebrating Britney: “Sometimes”

That the girls possess such feminist convictions makes it all the more surprising when they swing back into their defend-and-celebrate-Britney mode. I found particularly interesting—and quite perplexing—the reasons they articulated for which songs they believe have good messages and which songs have bad ones. (This judgment has nothing to do with whether they like the songs; they enjoy them all.) When we first started talking about particular songs, most of the girls said that “Sometimes,” the second and then-current hit from Spears’s debut album, was their favorite one. The lyrics to “Sometimes,” sung by Spears as a direct address to a (presumably) male “you,” seem to communicate quite clearly a girl’s dismay that her boyfriend is moving too fast and her hope that he’ll slow down and wait for her. She explains that she wants to be with him and wants to trust him, but also wants him to know why she comes off as “shy” and “moves away” every time he comes too close. Although the sentiment of the chorus—that all she desires is to be with him constantly, to hold him, and to treat him right—might not sit entirely comfortably with many women, the song’s “message” strikes me as reasonably palatable, particularly for teen pop. Once the girls informed me that it was their favorite, I expected to hear them applaud the girl in the song’s assertiveness for telling the guy to take things at her speed, not his.

But that’s not at all that the girls in focus group 1 hear in this song.

Melanie [to Emily]: So, what is your favorite song?
Emily: “Sometimes.”
Wendy: Yeah, “Sometimes.”
Melanie: Why that one?
Emily: I just like the concept—because she’s like different at different times. She has a lot of different personalities.
Wendy: Yeah, she’s different in that one.

(Focus group 1)

I was surprised and confused by this response during the session, but the conversation was moving on, so I let it go and the girls kept chatting. Later, while reviewing the audiotapes, I came to understand what the girls meant. On the one hand, from watching them sing along nicely with the verses but belt out the chorus, it’s clear that, for them, the song is the chorus. So forget the story. By “concept” of the song, Emily seems to mean that, literally, sometimes “Britney” runs, sometimes “Britney” hides, and sometimes “Britney” is scared. In other words, as she sees it, Britney Spears’s character in this song is different at different times, and she likes seeing her many sides. But Wendy’s follow-up comment is particularly interesting, and suggests that there is another layer of interpretation, another possible meaning in play. For Wendy, like many of the other girls, Spears does not act or play a character external to herself when she sings. She is always Britney Spears and it’s Spears herself singing these words. So Wendy seems to mean that in “Sometimes” Spears shows a different side of her personality than she does in her other songs.

The music, perhaps even more than the words, invites Wendy’s reading of the song. Musically, “Sometimes” was quite unlike Spears’s other two current hits,
“... Baby One More Time” and “(You Drive Me) Crazy.” While all three are slickly produced pop tunes, the latter two have a pop-R&B flavor, driving dance beats, and edgy synthesized instruments. Spears’s voice is at times distant and hollow (likely run through a mid-pass filter). The former is pure bubblegum pop. It lacks rhythmic drive even though its tempo is not that much slower than the other two (think high-school prom “slow dance”), and the backing track is fuller, with smoother and rounder synthesized instruments. Here, Spears’s voice sounds somewhat more natural. The positive message the girls find in “Sometimes” lies not so much in the song itself, but rather in its contrast—both lyrical and musical—with Spears’s other songs. In the end, the girls celebrate the many sides of Britney, and the idea, communicated musically, that she has different “personalities.”

**Condemning Britney: “... Baby One More Time”**

While the girls applaud the notion that Spears’s personality would have many different facets, they don’t necessarily approve of each one individually. Even though they hardly pay attention to a song’s “story” and become quite excited when *any* Britney Spears tune comes on the radio or television, they are none the less troubled by the singer’s “I’ll-do-anything-to-get-my-boyfriend-back” tunes, particularly the title track “... Baby One More Time.” In the lyrics, we learn of a relationship gone bad and the girl’s revelation that the reason she breathes is this boy. She confesses that there’s nothing she wouldn’t do for him and that she wants him to show her how he wants “it.” Her loneliness is killing her, she explains, and because when she’s not with him she loses her mind, she demands a sign—in short, the song’s hook: “Hit me baby one more time.”

Here, as in “Sometimes,” Spears is singing to a male “you,” only this time the message received is quite different. The girls don’t like Britney throwing herself at some guy and are particularly concerned about the possible meanings of one line in specific: “Hit me baby one more time.” We talked extensively in the focus group sessions about that line, and it’s obvious that some of the girls had talked about it before—either at home or with friends.

Rachel: Hit me baby one more time—my mom says that—
Brenda: In the video she’s like drooling over this guy—
Rachel: I think it’s about an ex-boyfriend that she wants back.
Jessica: I think it’s like—I don’t really want to say this but—[laughing]—
Brenda: In the video, at the end, she’s like drooling all over this basketball player.
Rachel: Not in the video he isn’t, but in real life he’s her cousin.
Wendy: I think Britney Spears should, like—like—I think she’s really desperate and she needs, like—somebody to, like—to care for her and, like—and, like, take her around and everything.
Jessica: [still laughing] she wants more sex! Come on, baby, give me some more!

(Focus group 1)

Allison: Hit me so I can tell that you love me still, I don’t know.
Julie: In the video, on the bleachers, it’s her cousin she’s looking at, it’s her cousin!
Melanie: So what’s the whole song about?
Allison, Julie & Monique: Sex! [laughing]
Melanie: Does it have a story?
Allison, Julie & Monique: no! [laughing]  
Allison: Hit me again! Lay me lay me lay me!  

(Focus group 2)

In the end, although they say the song has no story, the girls obviously have some sense of its narrative. “...Baby One More Time” is, to them, about lust. As they see it, Britney wants it, and wants it bad. She’s desperate and they’re disappointed. But, despite their disapproval of its message, they smile and laugh when they hear it, dancing and singing along. At these moments, the social process of being teen pop’s audience involves not reading or consuming a text individually but experiencing it together. The girls could be singing nonsense and still perform this communal activity.

### Conflicting Britneys and colliding feminisms

The greater conflict starts to come into focus, however, when we recognize that for the girls to celebrate Spears’s different “personalities,” she needs to embody both lust and purity, virtue and vice. And, further, they recognize the potential power of Spears’s bad-girl persona. When we consider the wider context for the girls’ active readings of these texts their confusion seems imminent.

In the middle of conversation about clothing, Kara shocked me, proclaiming:

Kara: If a guy thinks you’re sexy, you can get him to do anything.  

(Focus group 2)

I found startling not her directness or acuity, but her seeming approval of the implications of this statement. While the girls feel offended and angry when women’s bodies are objectified in media, many of them are surprisingly empowered by the idea that women themselves might choose to use their own bodies for personal or—in the case of Britney Spears—professional gain.

Several girls mentioned that all of their guy friends “hate” Spears’s music, but bought her album anyway. Why? For the pictures inside, particularly the one in which...

Allison: She’s humping the chair!  
Julie: I have a male friend who obsesses over her and one day a girl passed it [the ...Baby One More Time album jacket] out on the bus and he unfolded it like that and he was kissing it.  
Kara: I have this friend and he puts it over his bed and he took another one... he’s got like four copies and he cut out each picture and, like, pasted it on his pillow. I am not joking.  

(Focus group 2)

The girls are quite ambivalent about this clear objectification of Spears. They explain that the singer wants to sell albums and, with that photograph, she doubled her sales because all the guys would buy it too. They applaud this other type of “girl power” as well—in this case, Spears’s ability to suggest or assume an alternate identity, manipulate men, and get what she wants: the top-selling pop album of 1999.

In the end, though, what gets the girls frustrated, upset, and finally angry—what compels them to trash the singer they respect, admire, and adore—is that she presents them with an irreconcilable difference. They celebrate Spears’s ambition and success, a response that jibes with their “girl-power” feminism. And their
postfeminist awareness allows them to accept Spears’s adoption of a more sexual persona for the moment, especially when it gives her power. But at the same time they feel they must condemn Spears for her “whore” image, as their more traditional feminist convictions dictate. They see a conflict that can’t be resolved. How can you celebrate and condemn the same thing?

The girls’ intelligent readings and discussions of Larry Busacca’s and Albert Sanchez’s …Baby One More Time album-jacket photographs and David Lachapelle’s photographs in the April 15, 1999 Rolling Stone shed telling light on the social and cultural forces that give rise to their Britney Spears conflict. At its heart is the collision of their feminist convictions with a postmodern sense of self—one that consciously constructs distinct identities for different contexts and meanings.

When the girls became fixated on Britney Spears in the focus group sessions, I brought out some materials I thought they might look at and discuss. Rachel immediately snatched the Rolling Stone from my hand and tore through the magazine looking for the “slutty” photographs, eager to share them with the rest of the group. A few of the girls had already seen the article and photographs, but they enthusiastically went through them again, one by one, pointing out and describing with quite colorful language and very loud voices nearly every feature of the photographs: from Spears’s clothing, hair, makeup, and body to the props, settings, and other people in the backgrounds. The girls also passed around the unfolded compact-disc liner from Spears’s debut album (in focus group 1, they passed around two copies—mine and Jessica’s), shouting, pointing, and even at one point slapping the photographs on it.

In Larry Busacca’s main photograph inside the Britney Spears …Baby One More Time album, Britney, wearing tight blue jeans and a white tank top, cocks her head back and to the right, straddles an open-back chair and sports a warm and “innocent” smile; her hair falls softly around her face, covering much of her neck and shoulders while hiding her tank-top straps. David Lachapelle’s photograph for the cover of the April 15, 1999 Rolling Stone features Britney, made up with dark blush and heavy eye shadow and eye liner, lying on satin sheets in a push-up bra and hot pants; she is talking on the phone and looking provocatively into the viewer’s eyes; a Teletubby stuffed animal is tucked under her right arm. Among Lachapelle’s several photographs accompanying the article inside is one taken in Spears’ own childhood bedroom: a heavily made-up Britney, wearing a push-up bra, hot pants, and high heels, eyes the viewer seductively; scattered around her feet and on the desk/dresser behind her are dolls, stuffed animals, and other such trappings of suburban girlhood. In another photo, Britney looks lustfully over her right shoulder while pushing a little girl’s pink bicycle away from the viewer; her attire consists of a tight, elastic, strapless pink top and very short, white hot pants; the word “BABY” is sewn twice in sequins on the seat of the pants—once on each cheek.

The intensity of the girls’ reactions to the photographs was fascinating, almost shocking. And the words they use to describe what they saw are colorful and explicit.

Monique: My legs are open for you.
Kara: I’m sexy, come and get me, my boobs are hanging out, let’s go!
Melanie: What did you say?
Catherine: I would love to stick my tongue down your throat!
Melanie: You think that’s what that one says.
Catherine: Yes!
Melanie: OK.

...Kara: I can be sporty too, for all you sporty guys.
Catherine: She looks like she’s turning her head over so that you can see a little more than you’re supposed to—like, if that was a bigger picture—I think you’d be able to see a little more than you want to.
Melanie: OK, yeah, these are obviously kind of small.
Kara: Um, my shirt’s down real low, can you see? Um, I’m sporty for all the sporty guys. I have a lot of different personalities, come and check them out.

(Focus group 2, discussing photographs inside the Britney Spears Baby One More Time album)

Rachel: They’re awful.
Jessica: Oh my God! That is so uncalled for!
Brenda: That’s tacky.
Jessica: Oh my God!
Rachel: Well, her pants are posed and—
Brenda: Pressed all like so that picture right here, like, that’s all that hits you.
Melanie: Yeah, OK.
Anne: Like she’s wanting to be desired for by guys.
Jessica: That’s just awful.
Rachel: The thing is, she’s got all baby dolls acting like she’s in a little girl’s room and then she—she looks like she’s older and stuff.
Jessica: Oh my God!
Wendy: Ewww!
Rachel: Her eyeliner is so heavy.
Anne: I know, look at her eyeliner—
Jessica: That’s tacky! That’s not cute, that’s tacky!
Anne: She looks like—she’s like trying to be like, OK, like she’s wanting to be desired for by guys.

(Focus group 1, discussing the Rolling Stone “bedroom” photograph)

Monique: Oh my God!
Allison: Whore!
Julie: Oh my God!
Allison: She looks like a prostitute standing on the corner.
Kara: Twenty-dollar whore! Blow job!
Catherine: I think she looks like a slut.
Kara: She looks like a baby, can’t you tell, it’s written on her butt!—Come and get me!
Monique: Yeah, and look, there’s an ass cheek! You see the cheek?
Kara: Come and get me! Come on, baby, come on!
Allison: Oh baby!
Monique: There’s a butt cheek.
Kara: Come on and get me baby!

(Focus group 2 discussing the Rolling Stone “bicycle” photograph)

I was nearly overwhelmed by the girls’ reactions to these photographs. For several minutes they shouted angrily and hurled all sorts of invective at the Britney Spears they saw in these pictures, especially those published in Rolling Stone. But after this initial knee-jerk condemnation of Spears’s “slutty” appearance they engaged in quite a thoughtful analysis of the photographs. In fact, by the time they were finished looking at them, the girls in both focus groups had significantly
revised their thinking. While at first the girls felt that, as Rachel put it when speaking of Brenda’s sister (quoted above), “it makes us—like—all women are sluts,” in the end, they in fact claim the opposite: they have no problem with Spears (or anyone else) dressing in lingerie or the tightest and shortest of shorts, as long as she wasn’t made to dress like that by her manager or anyone else. (Whether Spears was or wasn’t is for my analysis of their analysis irrelevant.)

Julie: No, she [Spears] doesn’t even look comfortable in that. Janet Jackson wears tight clothes, but not like that, she doesn’t look comfortable in those.
Melanie: So, it sounds like comfort is an issue for you.
Julie: If they’re comfortable and feel pretty and sexy and they wear it with pride and dignity then who cares. You can tell that if she was not doing that for a shot then she wouldn’t be wearing those clothes. Janet Jackson you can see almost anywhere, I don’t care what it is, she looks so comfortable, like she’s got it.
Kara: Yeah, if you’ve got it—that’s fine!

(Focus group 2)

Rachel: Her producers put her up to that.
Brenda: On the TV and, you know—she said she didn’t want to do these pictures.
Melanie: So do you think she shouldn’t have done it?
Brenda: She can decide if she wants to do it or not.
Anne: If I was her I would not have done that but if I wanted to do that, I would have.

(Focus group 1)

The girls don’t want someone forcing Spears to dress in revealing clothing, but they don’t want someone telling her not to either. They believe women should dress however they feel comfortable, and if Britney Spears feels “pretty and sexy” in those clothes—if a woman can wear them with “pride and dignity”—that’s fine. The bottom line is that women should dress how they want to.

Curiously, though, they are less forgiving when Spears tries to look younger than she really is, when she puts on her “Catholic school girl” persona, as the girls call it. But ultimately, in what turns out to be quite a sophisticated reading of these texts, they are not bothered by Spears’s assumption of either the “whore” or the “Catholic school girl” persona individually. As Emily said, you can have “different personalities.” Rather, the girls are bothered by a clash of the two personae: a conflict of signifieds within the same frame.

Catherine: Oh my God, that little bike. Oh my God.
Julie: She has a little tricycle.
Monique: And when she puts her leg up on it—ohhhhh!
Julie: Girl! Aghhh! Stop it!
Catherine: OK, hold it. She’s 17. She’s 16, 17? And she has baby on her butt, I mean, come on, and then she has a tricycle, she’s about to get on it—
Julie: The image she’s got is trying to be—
Allison: Let me be sexy with the tricycle—get on the tricycle and go, baby, go! [pumping her hips, laughing]
Julie: is, like, trying to be all mature and, like, sexy and the bicycle is—and the bicycle is just implying that she’s a little person who doesn’t know what the heck she’s doing and that she’s not mature enough—
Kara: I think that these little—
Julie: The picture—she’s trying to make her look more mature, like more sexy, but—
Allison: Yeah, that’s a sexy prostitute picture—and look, her butt cheek’s hanging out!
Catherine: But you know what—I think that pictures like these or whatever, these pictures that you have, these pictures look, make her look worse.

(Focus group 2, discussing the Rolling Stone “bicycle” photograph, conversation continued)

Catherine: She has china dolls on top—ohh—ewww—
Allison: I’m gonna be like a china doll with breasts.
Catherine: But you know what, this, OK, this—
Kara: China doll—I think this one is called “I’m a big china doll with breasts, come and get me!”
Catherine: Because she has a tricycle, that image is baby, and then she has all these toys and stuff—
Monique: Teletubby—
Catherine: And that’s baby also—so I think that these are like [inaudible—others talking over her] but do you pose with short shorts and, um, showing your stomach and your boobs pushed up to your neck, I mean, do you want that on your record?
Julie: Have you heard that commercial about those girls who wear short shorts or something like that?
Kara: I can’t push them up that far—
Julie: They won’t go! [pushing up her own breasts]
Kara: But what this [Rolling Stone cover photo] says to me is I’m a little cutie, come and get me, I’m, yeah, I’ve got my little stuffed animals going—but, I don’t know, that’s says too much, that’s—that’s—
Catherine: I think all these pictures make her image look worse.

(Focus group 2, discussing all of the Rolling Stone photographs)

In the end, what offends the girls most is not the push-up bra, hot pants, or stilettoes, but their combination with the baby dolls, a “tricycle,” and the Teletubby. Likewise, it’s not the innocent smile and head-tilt, but her wearing of this expression while “humping a chair.” The girls seem frustrated not by a limitation or subordination rooted in the good girl/bad girl, slag/drag, or virgin/whore dichotomy, but rather by the projection of two such opposites concurrently. These “tweens” will accept only so much of a decentered self: it’s fine to wear masks, but please, wear only one at a time.

**Beyond Britney**

If the girls I got to know in 1999 are at all “typical,” today’s early adolescent, middle-class, suburban girls—many of whom have cell phones, beepers, and boyfriends—are smart and sophisticated young feminists. Indeed, they are quite articulate when it comes to condemning patriarchal values and resist conforming to traditional ideals of femininity. They actively read the many media texts they take in each day, often scrutinizing those they find troublesome or confusing. Their individual readings of various media texts frequently frustrate them, particularly when their feminist consciousness engages the increasingly decentered self of pop culture and postfeminism.
And yet they seem able to separate their disapproval from their enjoyment of those texts that confuse and anger them. At times, particularly when they are hanging out with friends, they hear but don’t listen, see but don’t read. In other words, their social practice of being teen pop’s target audience allows them to maintain strong feminist convictions and still enjoy songs, videos, and any other texts that don’t jibe with their politics.

Will their feminist convictions fade? Will they stop voicing resistance? Will they succumb to the passivity and submission mainstream effects research argues they are taught by mass media? Will they experience “the loss of voice, the narrowing of desires and expectations, the capitulation to conventional notions of femininity” so compellingly recounted in the many disturbing studies of adolescent girls (Brown 7)? Well, most of the girls gave me their home phone numbers. Those who didn’t gave me their cell phone numbers. And I have a standing invitation to meet with them again sometime in the future. So who knows how their lives, opinions, and values might change? But for now, at least, for the “tweens” I got to know in 1999, relationships between image, music, mass media, sexuality, and socialization exist in a state of constant flux at the point of reception rather than a state of absolute signification at the source. Today’s girl is the woman not yet determined.

Works cited


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